

A Word Not Heard Much These Days March 8

HISTORIC JARGON: Weasel Word. This term may be used as a noun or a verb.

A “weasel word” is a word or phrase in a statement, usually deliberate, that creates ambiguity or later allows avoidance of responsibility. Examples of such words are “probably,” “often,” and “somewhat;” phrases such as “it is said” and “many people think” are weasel words.

The concept of weasel words first appeared around the turn of the 20th century, and was denounced by no less a person than Theodore Roosevelt. The political commentator who first used the term said that such words sucked the meaning out of statements in the same way weasels would suck the content out of eggs and leave the shell.

Actually, according to Wikipedia, weasels are incapable of sucking eggs, a misunderstanding that was derived from a couple of phrases in Shakespearian plays.

What put us in mind of the term was re-reading a passage from an oral history given by Dr. Louis Tordella, who had been deputy director of NSA from 1958 to 1974. Long before he became D/DIR, in 1951, he had his first encounter with the new director of AFSA, Major General Ralph Canine (later to become the first director of NSA). Dr. Tordella remembered it this way:

“I recall the first time I faced Canine... I was asked to brief him about the efforts we were making to [snip] and I told him what we were doing and he said ‘What do you recommend?’ I gave him a general sort of answer. It was really weaseled.

“He said, ‘Goddammit! You’ve got your feet on both sides of the fence! Why?’

“I said, ‘Well, they are there, sir, because your predecessor told us that this would be our position, that we were not going to take a position.’

"Again he said, 'Goddammit, I am going to have both of my feet on the same side of the fence at one time and if I want, I'll jump over and put them on the other side. Now, what do you recommend?'

"I told him what I recommended and he said, 'Well, that isn't weaseling. That is the way I want to hear something. I agree with you.'

"Well, that was my first contact with Canine. I found him refreshing because he made decisions instead of stalling them off."